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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 001993

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [OSCE](#) [TU](#)
SUBJECT: TURKEY: AKP FLIRTS WITH ALEVI INITIATIVE

REF: A. ANKARA 1103
[1](#)B. ANKARA 0073

Classified By: POL Counselor Daniel O'Grady, reasons 1.4 (b,d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary and comment: Alevi leaders greeted with skepticism Turkish press accounts that the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) plans to create an office within the Ministry of Culture and Tourism to fund Alevi prayer houses (cemevis) and broaden Alevi rights. They believe AKP is courting the approximately 10-15 million traditionally leftist Alevi voters but does not sincerely desire to meet Alevis' long-standing demands, including official recognition of cemevis and the right of individual students to opt out of mandatory religious courses. AKP MP Reha Camuroglu, an independent-minded Alevi who resigned from the role of PM Erdogan's advisor on Alevi issues in June 2008 (ref A), told us the press reports are premature; Erdogan is still evaluating the political ramifications of a renewed Alevi initiative. Camuroglu believes Erdogan must achieve concrete progress on both the Alevi and Kurdish issues prior to March 2009 local elections, lest he face a defection of liberal AKP MPs and a significantly diminished independent vote. Considering the traditionally leftist Alevis' deep-rooted suspicion of AKP, a genuine Alevi outreach effort by Erdogan would be less an attempt to court Alevi voters than a bid to shore up his democratic bona fides in light of recent allegations that he has adopted a nationalistic, status-quo stance. Although Alevi outreach would help AKP present itself as a party still committed to the democratic reform process, Erdogan is unlikely to pursue more than very modest change prior to elections, for fear of alienating AKP's conservative Sunni base. End summary and comment.

Press Reports AKP Plans a New Alevi Initiative

[1](#)2. (U) Turkish press reported November 13-14 that AKP is preparing to revive its dormant Alevi initiative by creating a department with the Ministry of Culture and Tourism responsible for Alevi issues. According to the reports, State Minister for Religious Affairs Said Yazicioglu and AKP MP Reha Camuroglu would oversee a program to allocate GOT funds to the Ministry for use in building and maintaining Alevi prayer houses (cemevis) and paying the salary of cemevi staff. Assigning responsibility to the Culture Ministry reportedly would allow the government to circumvent legal provisions and judicial rulings that prohibit the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) from funding cemevis due to their current status as illegal gathering places (tekkes) for

religious orders (tarikats). Camuroglu, an Alevi Erdogan brought into the party before the July 2007 parliamentary elections as part of his effort to broaden AKP's base, resigned his position in June 2008 as Erdogan's special advisor on Alevi issues over frustration at what he perceived as lack of GOT support (ref B).

AKP Alevi MP Skeptical

13. (C) Camuroglu told us November 17 that the press reports are premature. PM Erdogan had called him several days ago to discuss the Alevi issue and had given "a yellow light" to restarting reforms. Erdogan is considering all angles of the issue, including how negatively the many "extreme Sunni" AKP supporters would respond to an effort to solve the problems of Alevis after having failed to fulfill the party's promise to reverse the headscarf ban. Camuroglu said he is skeptical following Yazicioglu's November 15 "classical center-right status quo" comment to the press that it would be difficult to grant Alevis new rights without also meeting the demands of other non-Sunni groups.

14. (C) Camuroglu believes that nothing less than the future of AKP hinges on how PM Erdogan approaches the Alevi issue. He told us that following the Constitutional Court's ruling to not close AKP, the GOT failed to meet its "obligation" to re-commit to democratic reforms. Many liberal AKP MPs and Turkish citizens had grown increasingly frustrated as Erdogan shelved reform efforts in favor of a combative, nationalistic

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stance, epitomized by his recent "love it or leave it" comment to Kurds in Diyarbakir. Erdogan can retain such supporters only by achieving "concrete progress." On the Alevi issue this means recognizing and funding cemevis. The selection of Alevi candidates to run for AKP in local elections would also be key, Camuroglu noted. If Erdogan does not act on these issues prior to elections Camuroglu said he will resign from the party. He believes Kurdish MP's will similarly defect if Erdogan does not reverse his status-quo stance toward the Kurdish issue, and that AKP will lose independent, democratic-minded voters as well.

Alevi Groups Retain Suspicion of AKP

15. (C) Hussein Gazi Association President Ali Yildirim told us the GOT's proposal was a thinly-veiled effort to attract votes in March 2009 local elections. Yildirim believes Erdogan wants to tap into Turkey's approximately 10-15 million Alevi voters, especially after he saw a recent Alevi rally in Ankara, which attracted 100,000 people. The rally showed the traditionally heterogeneous group is improving its ability to organize. Yildirim said AKP had completely failed to address any long-standing Alevi demands. The GOT had refused to implement a European Court of Human Rights ruling requiring Turkey to abolish or allow Alevis to opt out of the mandatory religious education course in public schools, and had balked at granting official recognition and allocating resources for the construction and administration of cemevis. The PM evidenced his "Sunni-centric" view when he declared in June 2008 that cemevis were not religious temples and therefore could not be granted state recognition.

16. (C) Alevi-Bektasi Federation Secretary General Kazim Genc told us the GOT is approaching the Alevi issue in the same "Sunni-centric" manner that doomed its January 2008 Alevi Iftar to failure (ref B). The GOT had failed to contact any of the 155 associations and 35 foundations under the Federation's umbrella in developing the new Alevi initiative described by the press. Genc said relying on Camuroglu "destined the effort to failure" because "true Alevis believe Camuroglu is an opportunist more interested in self-promotion

than improving the situation of Alevis." According to Genc, Camuroglu had shown his hypocrisy by remaining an AKP MP despite having resigned his position as Alevi advisor after he had seen AKP's "real face." Genc noted that putting Alevi issues under the Culture Ministry would subject Alevis to the control of a Sunni institution that maintains a tremendously distorted view of Alevism.

Academic Plans to Address Alevi Issues

17. (C) One of Turkey's foremost Alevi experts, Middle East Technical University (METU) Professor Aykan Erdemir, told us the GOT is unlikely to follow through on its new plan because it remains a conservative party with no genuine interest in improving the plight of Alevis. A sign of AKP's insincerity, in Erdemir's view, is the continuing GOT effort to build new mosques in poor Alevi villages where few to none practice Islam, instead of consulting the community about its needs. Erdemir said the infighting among AKP's three Alevi MP's would also impede progress. Two of the three -- Hussein Tugcu, an AKP founding member, and Ibrahim Yigit -- who are known for converting Alevis to Sunnism or a more conservative form of Alevism, vehemently resent Camuroglu's taking the lead on Alevi issues. The acrimony had helped kill AKP's first so-called Alevi initiative and would likely do so again. Frustrated with Turkey's long-standing failure to address Alevi issues, Erdemir is working with several European scholars of Alevism to open an Alevi Studies Institute in Ankara in early 2009. Erdemir told us the institute will promote equality and work to debunk pervasive myths about Alevis, such as the belief held even by many well-educated Turks that Alevis engage in incest.

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